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Using Personal Mission Statements and Codes of Ethics as Career Search Tools

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This professional development curriculum module provides students with a tool for their career search activities. The module contributes to the body of knowledge shared by faculty who prepare students to enter the fashion industry as effective practicing professionals. The activities are easily adaptable to courses offered at a variety of levels and across multiple content areas. The module can be accomplished in one class period, or can be implemented over time.

Increasingly, academies must prepare their graduates for success in professional positions, but employers report seeing disconnect between graduates and their abilities to perform well on the job (Fischer, 2013). The National Association of Colleges and Employers' (NACE) *2015 Job Outlook Survey* (NACE, 2014) noted teamwork, problem-solving skills, a strong work ethic, and leadership among the top 10 attributes desired by employers. The ability to recognize mission-driven priorities and make sound, ethical decisions – important components of leadership – are addressed in this module in ways that also draw on the aforementioned items.

This module was developed to address career preparation with the specific purpose of an artifact outcome – a personal mission statement and code of ethics. The process of identifying personal values and organizing these values into the artifact prepares students to consider the role of their values in leadership at work. The resulting artifact serves as a daily guide for students as well as a useful document during career search endeavors.

First, an overview of mission statements and codes of ethics is presented. Instructors emphasize that these items guide companies to implement values, establish frameworks for decision-making, hold members accountable, and present the organization's brand. Students are encouraged to consider these purposes in setting strategic priorities, promotional activities, hiring, and employee evaluation. Next the following in-class activity is completed:

(1) Review (and actively search for) company mission statements and codes of ethics. The format – mission statements as page headers to a list of “behavior oriented” statements that comprise a code of ethics – provides a model for this activity.

(2) With instructor guidance, the class members identify the company values conveyed in the missions and ethics codes presented in the overview. Using these examples, students consider the “fit” between the company's brand and the ideas and concepts presented in their documents.

(3) Students work collectively (through a brainstorming exercise) to identify a list of words that describe their values (e.g. compassion, diplomacy, equity, fairness, human rights, knowledge, etc.). The class goal is approximately 50 words. Having students record the words on giant post-it notes or on the front chalkboard works well. From the comprehensive list of brainstormed value words, each student submit his/her ‘top 3’ values. We use an electronic submission (Poll Everywhere) method and present a resulting word diagram.

(4) Using the top values identified by the class, students divide into teams of approximately five members to generate a “proposed” mission statement for the class. After

about 15 minutes of work, each team shares the resulting, proposed, class mission statement. If desired, the class can then consider the collective mission statement proposals and ultimately identify a class mission statement.

(5) With a mission statement for reference, the student teams work collaboratively to identify a list of action statements reflecting the mission and providing specific guidance for decision-making and behavior – thus creating the code of ethics. The process of presenting back to the entire class, and streamlining the code until it meets with general consensus is repeated. This class-owned artifact can be used as a course banner and to guide policies for the term.

Post-class Independent Assignment

The personal mission statement and code of ethics assignment follows the classroom-based activity. Students are expected to draw from their team-based experiences as a model for the process of identifying personal values, constructing a mission statement, and articulating a code of ethics. Students are encouraged to use this artifact in job search activities.

Evaluation of Effectiveness

After presentations to students in three different courses – an honors seminar (Ethics and You; n=23), a Professional Career Search Strategies (n=55), and Contemporary Ethical Issues in Fashion (n=18), the curriculum module has been evaluated and refined. Course instructors noted that the opportunity to bring students together in a team oriented code of ethics activity provided kinesthetically-based learning experience that effectively modeled a process each student could replicate. The reflection of one's interest, skills, and values is an integral part of the career decision-making process. The Cognitive Information Processing (CIP) Theory tells us that self knowledge and knowledge of career options can lead to effective career decision-making (Peterson, Sampson, & Reardon, 1991). The awareness and development of a personal mission statement and code of ethics allows students to make career choices that align with their values.

Plans for Revision and Continuation

As students mature from the first year to more focused, experienced professionals engaging in career search, they are encouraged to revisit and refine their personal mission statements and codes of ethics. In addition to serving as personal guides for daily decision-making, these documents are excellent additions to their career search and performance portfolios and provide impressive talking points during job interviews.

We have identified opportunities for future partnerships with industry to provide feedback and insight to students. Interdisciplinary collaborations, where students in different disciplines can share their perspectives about workplace values and ethics, are planned.

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